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Flying

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“FLYING”

by Juliene Sesar

Here she comes. Keep breathing, suck in every uncontaminated particle of clean air from the open windows as possible. She is just as much a lost cause as you are. There is nothing that any of you could do to change what happened when the plane hit. All you can do is choose whether you'll die your way, or the way that is pre-determined.

“Chef Tom?”

“Yes, love?” he smiled at the always professional manner his wife addressed him with at work. In the middle of a crisis, she still tried to keep a cool-head.

“We checked the staircase...the way down is blocked, and the fire is rising,” a single tear started to fall from her right eye. Elizabeth masked her emotions far better than the hundred or so other people trapped in Wild Blue this morning, but she had started to break. “What should we do?”

“Tell Mrs. Olender.”

“Yes, Chef.” She turned and walked away skirting around families, employees and other staff congregating closer and closer to the windows as the oxygen levels slowly decreased. It's been five minutes since the plane hit, and there is still hope in the air.

Chef Tom turned back to the Manhattan skyline, what could possibly happen to make a pilot lose so much control that he would run into a building in lower Manhattan? Mrs. Olender said the police are at as much of a loss as we are and are trying to figure out a way to get us all out, but it isn't looking too good.

“Ladies and gentlemen...Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention please?”

The scared chatter that had been barely above a whisper before stopped immediately and the room filled with the sound of fire and faint screams from below and above as Mrs. Orlander began her speech ten minutes after the crash. Chef Tom could barely see her through the smoke, but he knew her face to be filled with professional remorse. Her training made her avoid public displays of fear to keep the peace, and she wouldn't let the customers and employees see her panic until the end.

“Hello...I'm sorry to inform all of you that the access stairs are unsafe for us to evacuate. The elevators are also blocked. The crash we heard earlier, and the fire and smoke that is coming from the lower floors, is from a plane crash. They are unsure how the plane ended up crashing into lower Manhattan, but they are doing everything that they can to resolve it. I assure—”

“What about the elevators? We could use those. They aren't blocked. I looked a minute ago,” yelled a young man in a maroon sports coat at the back.

“The police believe, based on the blueprints of the building, that the plane has crashed through the elevator shaft, as well as the staircases. I'm sorry, but there is no way for us to proceed with an evacuation.”

As the truth sunk in, a few people began to cry. Tom heard the man that had already spoken mutter to himself that it couldn't be true, and one old woman with a giant gold peacock brooch attached to her purple jacket lapel asked, “Is there no hope, then? We can't even get the children out?”

“No,” replied Mrs. Orlander. “I will continue contacting Port Authority, and hopefully they will find a way to get us out of here. Stay calm, and ask our employees if you need anything.” She walked out of the dining room and disappeared into the kitchen. Undoubtedly wanting a private moment alone to call her family.

The few children in the room clung to their parents, who now held them tighter than before. Tom looked to Elizabeth, she was looking straight at him. Their children were safe at their grandma's house, and nothing could be more relieving. She came away from the old couple that had immediately ran

up to her and asked if they could open more of the windows. Elizabeth, his Lizzy, always the professional when they worked the same shift, ran into Tom's arms.

"We need to call them, Tom." Of course she meant James and Cecelia. "I need to talk to them...I can't accept this without hearing their voices one last time."

"It will be okay, Lizzy." Tom hugged her tighter and pulled her away from the other groups having the same conversations with their loved ones. He took her closer to the window, and let her cry on his shoulder. "Lizzy, shush, it will be okay. They will be okay. Mom will take care of them. She won't let anything bad happen to them."

"I know, but—" a sob broke deep in her throat and she couldn't stop the tears that streamed down her cheeks onto his chef's coat. "James is only eleven, and Cecelia is seven. We're going to miss so much.

"I don't want to lose them. Is there anything we can do?" She looked up at him for the first time with hope. Her eyes had turned red from the sobbing but they had a strength in them when she spoke of possible hope.

"I don't know, Lizzy," Tom stalled, hoping that his answer wouldn't encourage her, but also wishing it would work. "We could try to make it to the roof." Lizzy's eyes widened and the tears stopped. She was looking past Tom and out the window. "What is it, love?" He turned to look, saw nothing but smoke and Manhattan below and turned back to her still shocked expression.

"I thought I saw someone...Oh my God!" She pushed him away and he turned his face to the window. "What?" Tom asked again before he saw what she must have seen another person do moments before. A man falling from an upper level. Tom leaned out the window and saw his body tumbling like a broken doll falling towards the inevitable death that waited below.

"Tom," Lizzy's shocked tone brought him back to what they had been saying. "Tom, why are they jumping? They must know that they can't survive a fall from this height."

“Maybe they fell,” Tom replied seeing another body falling further down the side of the restaurant windows.

“Tom...there’s too many of them,” her fear finally caught back up to her and she asked again with more strain: “What are we going to do?”

“Grandma said that you’re in the tower, dad. She says that you won’t come home tonight.” James’ voice betrays the lack of information Tom’s mom gave him. Good, he doesn’t need to know exactly what happened to them yet.

Tom and Lizzy went into the kitchen to have this conversation on speakerphone away from the other people that are trapped in the restaurant.

“Yes, James. We aren’t sure if we will come home, but we’re going to do our best.”

“Okay, dad. Will we stay with grandma ‘til you come home?”

Trying to answer, Tom’s voice caught, and Lizzy answered for him, “Yes, James. Be a good boy and listen to your grandmother. She is in charge while your father and I are...gone.”

“Mommy?” Cecelia’s voice breaks in. Tom’s mom must’ve put their phone on speaker too so they could all hear.

“I’m here CeCe,” Lizzy looked at Tom and took a deep breath.

“Mommy...come home soon. I drew you a picture of us.”

“Thanks, sweetie. What did you draw it with?”

“Crayons. I got some on the table though. Grandma was mad. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, sweetie.” Lizzy looked as though she’d give anything to see her little girl’s brightly colored stick figure drawing of them. Probably on some hill holding hands under a circular yellow sun.

Tom cleared his throat. “James.”

“Yeah?”

“Take care of your sister for us until we get home.”

“Okay, dad.”

Tom looked at Lizzy, and let her say what he didn’t want to say for the last time: “We love you both very much, but mommy and daddy have to go. Give the phone to grandma so your dad can talk to her.”

“Okay, mommy,” Cecelia said. “I love you.”

“I love you,” James chorused. They heard the phone being passed to Tom’s mom.

“Hey, son. What’s going on?” She had turned off the speakerphone.

“There is no way for us to get out so we are gonna try and go up the stairs to the roof access. Hopefully that works.”

Screams filled the building and Lizzy ran from the room.

“What’s going on, Tom? What’s happening? Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Lizzy’s fine too. People might have noticed the people jumping.”

“What? Oh my God,” his mom took a sharp intake of breath. “Another plane hit the South Tower.”

“Are you sure?” Tom asked.

“Yes, oh my God. It’s on the news right now. It hit just now. Oh, Tom. This isn’t an accident, is it?”

“No, mom...I don’t think so. I’m going to try and get to the roof. Please take care of the kids...if we don’t come home. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Tom hung up before she could say goodbye. He didn’t want to hear it, in case it was true. He went into the dining room and noticed the distinct change in atmosphere. Everyone seemed to realize that this was it and the crying got louder.

Lizzy ran at him from across the room where she had been staring at the plane protruding from the South Tower. “Tom, we have to go, we have to try. The smoke is getting worse in here, Mrs. Olender wants everyone moved to the 106th floor. She thinks it will a little better higher away from the plane, but I think we should try to get higher than that.”

“Okay, let’s go see.”

The South Tower fell right before ten o’clock and he heard Lizzy whisper, “What’s going to happen to us?” He held her closer. No words could protect her from what was to come. Tom knew that they had to make a decision soon.

They had no choice but to stay on the 106th floor. The 107th was too smokey, the roof access was blocked, and Mrs. Olender thought that the helicopters wouldn’t be able to get past all the smoke to pick up anyone. Tom had lost count of the amount of people he had watched decide to make the jump, and all he wanted was to make sure Lizzy stayed safe in his arms. What was that line from the Titanic?

‘You jump, I jump’. He wouldn’t let her go without him. They’d do this together.

“Lizzy...”

She looks up at him from where she has curled into him after they had sat on the floor when they gave up their attempt to climb the staircase to the roof. She looked so peaceful, secure in his arms. “Yes?”

“What do you want to do?” he brushed his hand along her face before taking a deep breath. “I don’t think we will make it out of here without a miracle.”

“I don’t want to die the way they planned for me to die,” an hour ago she had decided that America was under attack, and we were victims of the enemies first attack. “But I don’t want to die alone.”

“Neither do I,” he leaned down and kissed her. “Should we jump?”

Holding Lizzy’s hand on one side and the side of the window with the other, Tom looked at his wife at ten twenty a.m. on September 11th, 2001.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“When we jump grab me around the waist and I’ll hold on to you...pretend that we’re flying.” Lizzy shook her head...she couldn’t fully accept the idea. “Okay.”

It’s ten twenty-five.

“Ready, my love?” Lizzy lets go of the window and grabs hold of Tom’s waist. He takes his hand that she just released and wraps it tightly around her for the last time.

“Let go, Tom. We’re ready.” Tom lets go and jumps with Lizzy in his arms into the awaiting Manhattan skyline. The world looks beautiful as they hold each other for this last time and the North Tower begins to crumble behind them. For one second, they are flying, not falling in a tangled mess that will eventually tear them apart to die alone, just flying.

